

Beware the Brand Imitation Trap – Why Copying Giants Like Nike Could Kill Your Startup

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Many brands today fall into the brand imitation trap. This means they look at big, successful brands and think that copying their moves will also be the key to their own success. But in our current business landscape, where mistrust is rampant (furthered by AI), establishing a distinct and authentic brand identity has never been more important.

And just because a campaign or tactic worked for someone else doesn't necessarily mean it will work for you. Look at Nike, for example. Their simple slogan of "Just Do It" is recognized around the world. It works today because they have a massive, loyal following and a strong brand presence. We know this phrase, and we like it.

"Just Do It" also took off because it played off the famous last words of the killer, Gary Gilmore. Nike took a highly charged phrase that was culturally relevant at the time and morphed it into something positive that everyone understood.

So, don't be surprised if you copy something and wonder why it doesn't work for you. You either need cultural relevance with a killer product or the existing recognition and large audience that comes with an already well-established brand.

As a startup, you have more at stake and more to prove. Which

makes it much more important to put your own stake in the ground and steer clear of the brand imitation trap.

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Authenticity is becoming more important for brand-building

Being authentic is one of the most important efforts to focus on as a brand. If you live and breathe authenticity as a company, over time, you can create a loyal community that values, supports and shows up for you. And this genuine approach is what helps earn trust in both your company and your brand. So yes, be yourself!

Another factor to consider: with the prevalence of AI and misinformation, the public is already trusting individuals over companies or brands. So focus your efforts on building trusted, authentic leaders first. That trust will eventually rub off on your brand.

At Wistia, we've built an authentic and trusted brand by giving our leaders and employees permission to be themselves, bringing customers on the journey with us, and constantly pushing to be creative in all that we do.

But authentic brand building doesn't happen overnight. Here is my advice to you:

1. Start with a small idea

Start building your platform around something that you have a unique or specialized stance on. Being one of the few informed people speaking on a topic will help you stand out and build trust with your audience. You don't have to be far ahead of everyone else to be an expert on something. And if you can

teach while you are learning, you have an opportunity to bring a fresh approach to what you share.

2. Know your customer better

This should be obvious, but sometimes, we all need a reminder that the customer is king. You are likely not the first in your market, but it's possible to be closer to and have a deeper understanding of your customers than anyone else. To achieve this, you need to focus on a narrow ideal customer profile and then stay close to their opportunities and challenges.

This is much easier for small companies than big ones. Big brands often struggle to build the systems needed to stay close to customers, and they especially struggle to move quickly to give customers what they want.

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3. Play the long game

Building trust through authenticity is a marathon, not a sprint. Giants like Nike, Apple and Coca-Cola didn't become the brands they are today in a matter of months or a few years.

A short-term mindset often leads to quick fixes, brand imitation and taking shortcuts, which makes it harder to succeed in the long run. Put in the necessary work now for long-term results.

4. Measure success along the way

Lastly, remember to monitor your performance through customer surveys and metrics. This will help you determine what's working and what you need to adjust.

Stay close to the qualitative feedback and pivot quickly when you get new insights. You'll find what works faster and be able to move further ahead than a larger organization.

I'm proud to say that we recently celebrated our 18th birthday at Wistia. We've been very fortunate as a company, and I'm a firm believer that we got this far by being our most authentic selves and building the most loyal customer base. Remember: embrace your uniqueness in everything you do. It's what makes you irreplaceable in the end.

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